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RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 0129
RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE 0069
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SUBJECT: PARTIES JOCKEY FOR POSITION JUST DAYS BEFORE ASSAM STATE
ELECTION

REF: A) CALCUTTA 0029; B) CALCUTTA 0032; C) CALCUTTA 0071

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: On April 3 India's Northeastern state of Assam will begin its two-phased state assembly election. The second phase will be the following week on April 10. Even in the last hours of campaigning, the situation is still very fluid. No party has a clear majority and yet no formal alliances have been announced. Instead, parties have made arrangements in various constituencies, such as the ruling Congress Party's concession not to run candidates against the Bodo tribal party Bodoland People's Progressive Front - Hagrama (BPPF-H), which controls the Bodoland Territorial Area District. The lack of formal alliances reflects the parties' desire to keep their options open in the post election jockeying to establish a government. Adding to the instability is the continued possibility of violence from various ethnic groups. Congress is struggling to maintain its dominance but still appears likely to form a coalition government. End Summary.

12. (U) On March 1, the Election Commission announced a two-phase election for the 126-seat Assam legislative assembly. 65 Legislative Assembly constituencies will go to polls in the first phase on April 3 and 61 on April 10. Votes will be counted on May 11.

13. (SBU) Even with polling just days away, the parties have yet to make any formal alliances. The parties prefer to coordinate their campaign only in specific constituencies. For example, the ruling Congress Party has an understanding with Bodo tribal party Bodoland People's Progressive Front - Hagrama (BPPF-H) which controls the Bodoland Territorial Area District that Congress candidates will not run in the Bodo areas. Opposition regional party Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) announced it would not ally with Hindu opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), recognizing the potential importance of the Muslim community, which constitutes almost 30 percent of Assam's 26 million people. In addition, the AGP has an understanding with a number of small Leftist parties like the Communist Party of India - Marxist (CPM), Communist Party of India (CPI), the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) and Bodo party faction the BPPF (R). The parties will therefore avoid having candidates competing in the same constituencies.

14. (U) The recently formed Muslim party, the Asom United

Democratic Front (AUDF), backed by the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Hind, may have an understanding with the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) led by former Lok Sabha Speaker Purno A. Sangma. The AUDF leadership has claimed it will oppose the Congress for failing to protect Muslim interests. However, while campaigning in Assam on March 30, Congress President Sonia Gandhi has said her party is committed to minority rights and has introduced the Foreigners' (Tribunals for Assam) Order 2006 under the Foreigners Act. This order will protect illegal Bangladeshi immigrants, making the process for identification of an illegal migrant and possible deportation, too difficult and time consuming to implement. The new order will effectively re-instate the Illegal Migrants Determination Tribunal Act (IMDT), which the Supreme Court found unconstitutional in July 2005. Though only a few months old, the AUDF is reportedly already plagued by factionalism.

15. (SBU) The lack of defined political alliances reflects the parties' desire to keep their options open in the anticipated wrangling to form a coalition government. State Congress Secretary Pradut Bhuyan (protect) told post that no single party

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can hope to win an absolute majority in the assembly. A coalition government led by the Congress Party seems to be the most likely scenario. Assam Congress leader Bhubaneswar Kalita also commented that the party is intentionally avoiding discussing the fate of Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi to appease the ethnic minorities who feel Gogoi has failed to protect their interests and in a more blatant example of pandering, on February 27 the Congress government officially announced Assam is now called "Asom," the ethnic Assamese name for the state.

16. (SBU) An intelligence official told post that although the elections are expected to be mostly peaceful, terrorist group United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) or possibly unspecified Muslim groups could conduct attacks during the polling.

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According to media sources, ULFA has expressed apprehensions that if an AGP and BJP government comes to power as they did prior to 2001, there would be more secret killings and operations against ULFA members. ULFA has also warned, through the local media, the political parties in Assam against encouraging people to vote, describing the elections as nothing more than a "farce" repeated every five years, which enables the Center to expand its "colonial rule" in Assam. An ULFA statement released on March 30 said, "It is time the people of Assam reject political parties or leaders who do not have a definite plan or given a concrete assurance to solve the India-Assam conflict (sic)."

17. (SBU) COMMENT: With no party likely to receive a clear majority, the presently ruling Congress appears most likely to be able to form a coalition government, given its existing dominant position. Congress officials are hoping to receive at least 45 seats and then cobble together the 64 seats required to govern through alliances with a number of smaller parties. However, the Muslim vote will be decisive in the election. In the past, they have voted en bloc for the Congress but now the vote will be divided between the AUDF and Congress. A split in the Muslim vote gives a glimmer of hope to the AGP and BJP that they also have a small chance at forming a government.

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